

Organize an Outstanding Classroom Library

Until now, I never associated a successful independent reading program with a well-organized classroom library.

—Monica Carrera-Wilburn (multiage primary-grades teacher,
English immersion, Mesa, Arizona)

My school residencies begin with a walk through the school building and into the classrooms to meet teachers and students. I am always impressed by the care teachers and administrators take to make their schools and classrooms inviting literacy environments. At the same time, I am startled by the absence of classroom libraries. When libraries do exist, it is rare to see them well equipped and organized according to teachers' and students' needs and interests. It is the same in just about every school I visit.

Whenever the weeklong focus is guided reading and comprehension—as it often is—we usually wind up working first on the classroom libraries. Even when books in the classroom are plentiful, teachers control how they are organized, too few students know how to select books they can read, the collection is often hard for students to penetrate, and too little time has been set aside for reading. Classroom libraries are a literacy necessity; they are integral to successful teaching and learning and must become a top priority if our students are to become thriving, engaged readers.

It is difficult to maintain a strong independent reading program without an excellent classroom library. Sadly, while we have poured thousands of dollars into commercial programs, technology, and test preparation, it is rare for funds to be allocated for classroom libraries. When classrooms do have adequate libraries, most often, teachers have spent large sums of their own money. We need to lobby our administrators, superintendents, and school board members to allocate funds so that classroom libraries become a necessary literacy staple instead of an optional add-on.

Classroom Libraries and Books Improve Reading Achievement

The availability of reading materials greatly impacts children's literacy development. The most effective reading programs are generally supported by large classroom libraries. The better the libraries, the better the reading achievement as measured by standardized tests. Books contribute more strongly to reading achievement than any computer software does.

Schools with lots of low-income families have far fewer books available for students, and classroom libraries can help level that playing field. Simply put, children read a great deal more when they have easy access to books, and well-designed, organized, ample classroom libraries provide the easiest access for students.

We need to use what we find out about students' reading interests to build our classroom library. If students are to choose to read and develop positive attitudes about reading, they must have access to engaging reading material. Knowing students' interests, whether it's a particular author, series, or genre, is critical for making the classroom library accessible to them and for encouraging the reading habit.

Additionally, we need to ensure that students have books and materials to read at home, both to borrow and to keep. Some ways to expand home reading materials include but are not limited to:

- Home-school literacy book packs.
- Reproducible books (The KEEP program of The Ohio State University; Nellie Edge; Newbridge).
- Book clubs (Scholastic, Lucky, Troll).
- Summer reading programs (PTO fund-raising, discarded library books).
- Library cards (helping all families obtain one, perhaps by inviting a library employee to the school on an open house night to sign families up).
- Suggested titles and resources for parents to purchase.

Expand Access for Struggling Readers

Access to interesting books is especially critical for struggling readers. One recent study found that when struggling high school readers were asked to suggest what books should be added to the classroom library and when teachers did brief "book talks" on new books, students read much more and developed positive attitudes about reading. I have found this to be equally true for younger and middle school readers.

Be Sure to Include and Value "Light Reading"

It really doesn't matter much what kids read as long as they read and enjoy what they're reading. By gently nudging them and introducing them to better literature—through reading aloud, co-reading, and putting books into their hands—their reading tastes will eventually grow to include more sophisticated materials.

I read primarily romance comic books—teenage dating and love stories—until I was well into my teens, and I'm a very good reader today. Mostly, I read secretly under the covers by flashlight so my mother wouldn't know. My mother, an avid reader, was so concerned with my lack of interest in reading books that she would check out classics from the library and read them aloud to me. Eventually, but not until I was about sixteen, I started to read literature in earnest. In fact, I believe it is because I did so much "light reading" through high school that I now seek out the "higher-brow" stuff.

"Light reading" is essential for turning our struggling readers into competent readers. Too often there are too few books available that struggling readers can actually read. Comic books, magazines, picture books—all with engaging text supported by lots of illustrations—appeal because they seem more manageable to students.



teaching tip

Teacher Book Talks

Celebrate new books, and entice students with something interesting about the book:

- Setting.
- Writing style.
- Problem.
- Suspense.
- Characters.

Series books also hold great appeal. The characters, setting, format, content, and writing style repeat somewhat in each book, making succeeding books easier to understand. Not only does such reading improve fluency, but also, as readers become increasingly familiar with the common elements in a series, they can more easily focus on meaning. Having strong background knowledge and familiarity with a particular series also makes it easier to predict and figure out new words successfully. Students' success and confidence with series books provides an incentive to do more reading and also brings them into the classroom community of readers who enjoy reading and talking about books.

Take a Critical Look at Your Classroom Library

It's difficult for students to spend lots of time reading if they can't easily find interesting materials. Since we know that the amount of reading students do positively impacts their achievement, it makes perfect sense for the classroom library to be the cornerstone of the literacy classroom. Remember, too, that your own enthusiasm for reading and talking about books will inspire and motivate your students to read.

ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS WHEN EVALUATING YOUR CLASSROOM LIBRARY AND THINKING ABOUT HOW TO MAKE IT CENTRAL AND VITAL:

- When you walk into your classroom, does the library or book nook jump out at you, or is it all but invisible?
- Does your library corner look beautiful and contain an inviting display of plentiful reading materials, or does it look bland and impoverished?
- Does the library include a variety of genres and literary forms—poetry, picture books, informational books, mysteries, fantasy, popular series—or does it house mostly fiction and textbooks?
- Are most of the books in the library written by well-known children's authors, or are they part of a program that has been created and leveled by a publisher?
- Do you have current books that accurately and aesthetically portray other cultures, or is your collection homogeneous and dated?
- Can children find books in which their language and culture appear, or are they unlikely to “see themselves” in the collection?
- Have students been involved in the selection and organization, or have you made all the decisions about design, how books are grouped, and what reading materials to include?
- Can struggling readers easily find books they can and want to read, or do they spend most of their independent reading time searching for books?
- Are there comfortable areas in which students can sit and read, or can students only read at their desks or tables?
- Do you and your students rotate, change, and add to the collection based on changing needs, interests, and curriculum, or is your collection static?
- Does your library include children's favorite authors, books, and series, or is the collection limited to what you have on hand and your own preferences?
- Most of all, is the library a place children love to go to seek and find wonderful reading materials, or is it a rarely used appendage in your classroom?



teaching tip

Daily Book Sign-Out

- Put students in charge of the classroom book-lending process.
- Have volunteers or students attach an adhesive pocket on the inside back cover of each book. Place a card labeled with the book's title inside each pocket.
- Create a sign-out board with a name or photo pocket for each student.







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- Most of all, is the library a place children love to go to seek and find wonderful reading materials, or is it a rarely used appendage in your classroom?

Provide Lots of Choices and Books

An adequate classroom library will have at least two hundred books, but an excellent library will have more than a thousand. The more books in the collection, the less depleted it becomes as kids sign books out every day. Be sure to have several copies of the popular titles so that these books don’t “disappear.” Multiple copies also encourage reading with a partner, which is a great way to practice reading and enjoying texts. And include previous read-alouds and texts used in shared reading as well as class-authored and student-authored texts.

For new teachers and teachers new to a grade, having sufficient books and reading materials is a common problem. Money isn’t the only issue; often teachers don’t know what books to order when they do have the funds. See the following “Try It Apply It” for some ways to build your library collection.

TRY IT APPLY IT

-  Approach your Parent Teacher Organization. PTOs are often willing to raise money for books through fund drives and donations.
-  Have students bring in favorite books from home “on loan.” This is a great way to augment your collection. (Of course, book handling and respect for others’ books will first need to be modeled and discussed.)
-  Watch for sales at discount outlets and bookstores. (Our local Borders has a teacher appreciation weekend every spring where all books are discounted by 25 percent.)
-  Find out what students are interested in, and borrow from school and public libraries. (Some public libraries are willing to rotate sets of fifty books or more to help classroom libraries get established.)
-  Talk with your administrator. (If you are not ordering workbooks to go along with a basal anthology, see if that money can go toward trade books for the classroom instead. Or simply state your case and the research showing why classroom libraries are so critical for readers, and request a few hundred dollars to purchase books.)
-  Take advantage of classroom book clubs such as Scholastic and Troll. Bonus points from orders can be used for free books.

- ✎ Seek donations from families. In your newsletter, suggest that parents donate a book in honor of a child's birthday or special accomplishment. Also, request that quality books in good condition that are no longer being used in the home be donated to the classroom library.
- ✎ Check out used-book outlets! Gently used titles can usually be found for less than two dollars.
- ⇒ To keep your collection fresh, consider an occasional school or classroom "book swap." For each book in good condition, a student is given a coupon that can be exchanged for a different book. Teachers can trade some of their books, too. One teacher I know trades about 25 percent of his classroom library every year at a swap. (To ensure that all students can choose a book even if they have none to trade, some families donate extra books or the library donates some "carefully worn" discarded books.)

Find Out Students' Favorite Authors, Series, and Book Titles

A great way to begin organizing your library is to find out what your students like to read. Ask them, and chart their responses. (See charts on page 70.) Then, based on those responses, begin to create a library they will want to use. If students are unable to suggest any titles, find out the subjects they're interested in knowing more about and begin to read aloud appropriate authors, titles, and genres. Honoring students' choices is not just about considering their wishes; students read more when materials they are interested in are readily available.

Even middle school and high school students will choose to read if they can find stuff they like, and this usually includes more nonfiction and magazines as well as books with more illustrations. Other preferences include series books, scary stories, sports books, and even comic books. The top three choices for more than seventeen hundred sixth graders in twenty-three diverse schools were magazines, adventure books, and mysteries.

Young students love counting and concept books, predictable books with rhythm and rhyme, nursery rhymes, alphabet books, fairy tales, joke books, familiar stories by favorite authors (including themselves), and nonfiction animal books and other reference books. Kindergarten teacher Karen Sher, in Shaker Heights, Ohio, notes that her students also gravitate to picture dictionaries; they love to look at the pictures and read the captions under each one.

Students engage more when they are motivated to read, and a wide variety of captivating choices increases reading motivation. Engagement is not to be taken lightly: "reading comprehension test scores are more influenced by students' amount of engaged reading than any other single factor."

Pay Attention to Students' Interests and De-emphasize Leveled Books

It is disheartening to see classroom libraries in which most of the books are leveled. Some students identify themselves by that level: "I'm a level 8. John is a level 12." While levels can be a helpful guide for teaching students, we need to be careful to factor in the quality of the



teaching tip

Bookstore Fieldtrip

Take a class field trip to the local bookstore to note children's interests and choose new books.

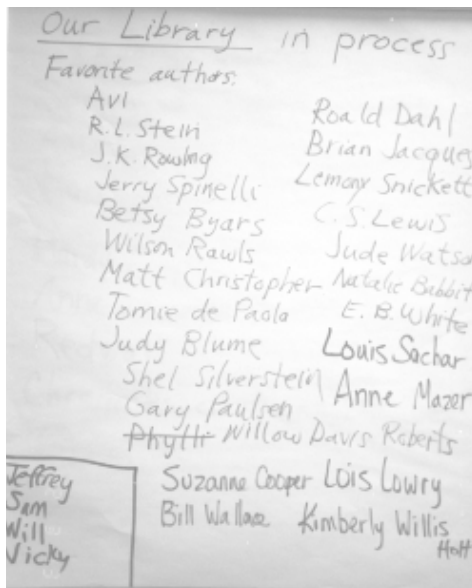
text and students' interests. When we show students how to select "just-right" books, even older struggling readers can appropriately choose books:

No grade-level markings were put on the books, as is popular in some computerized book management programs. Students simply browsed through the books and determined if they liked the book and were able to read it. Teachers reported no problems with students finding books that they could understand and enjoy.

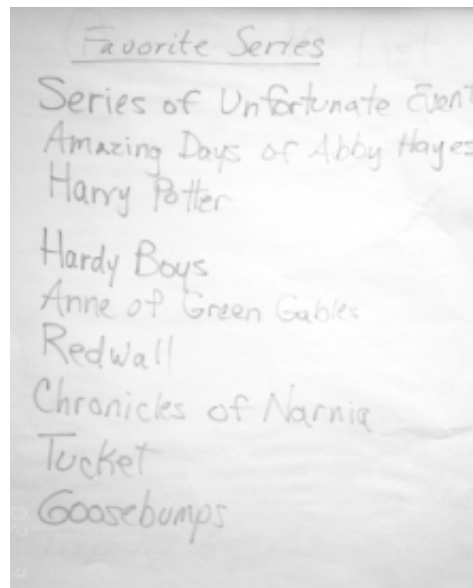
Students do not naturally gravitate to leveled or overly structured collections. When they can choose from a rich and varied assortment, a leveled book or a phonics reader is not usually a first choice.

**TRY IT
APPLY IT**

- ✍ Make class lists of favorite books, authors, and series (see the following photos on page 70).
- ✍ Ask students to loan a few favorite books from home to the emerging classroom library. (Make sure each book has the student's name in it.)
- ✍ Borrow from school and public libraries to augment your collection. (Aim for a minimum of seven to ten books per student.)



Getting the library organized



Deciding how to organize the classroom library

Include Lots of Nonfiction

A big part of our job as teachers is to introduce books to readers. Many of these books need to be nonfiction, because nonfiction still tends to be scarce in classrooms. More nonfiction reading leads to more informational writing, which is related to higher reading achievement. Want proof? Nancy McDonough and Laurie Fox are second-grade teachers in Tenafly, New Jersey. For the past seven years, they have taught all their reading through nonfiction books connected to science and social studies. Not only do their students learn a vast amount about

the world as they are learning to read, their test scores are exemplary. Almost all their students routinely test above grade level in reading on standardized tests.

In truth, students often prefer nonfiction. In surveying a class of first graders who could choose from over thirty categories of books organized in individual baskets, most students selected “nonfiction” and “animals” as top choices. A second-grade teacher was surprised to learn that her students wanted books about “sea life” added to the classroom library. And a multiage primary-grades teacher reported that her students requested more “how to” books, especially kids’ crafts and projects.

I now regularly use nonfiction books in guided reading, even in first grade. (See the grade 1 guided reading lesson on pages 175–177, using a little book published by National Geographic.) It is all well and good for students to know their letters and sounds, but if they lack sufficient background knowledge, reading informational texts is very challenging. The earlier they become familiar with how nonfiction works, the easier it will be for them to read and understand informational storybooks.

Students also enjoy nonfiction magazines such as *Time for Kids*, *National Geographic for Kids*, *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, and *Kids Discover*. We need to make sure these are part of our classroom library and reading program.

Make Books and Book Talk “Hot” in Your Classroom

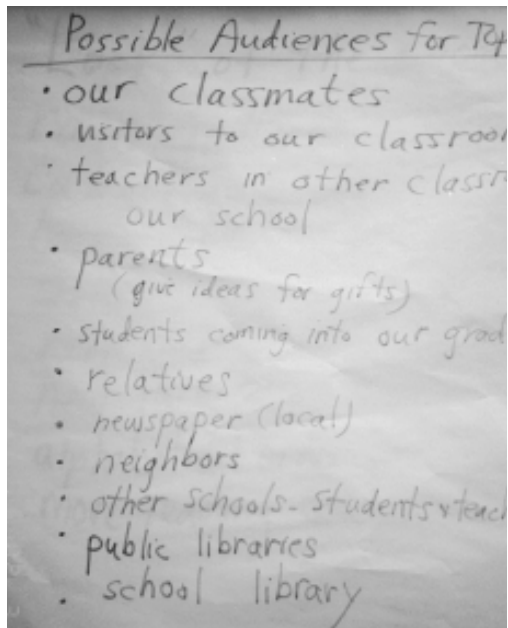
When I talk with students about how I choose books to read, I show them *The New York Times Book Review*, which I read weekly and rely on for some of my upcoming reading selections. I show them the “top-ten” lists for fiction, nonfiction, and children’s books and tell them I read these lists every week. It’s one way of seeing what others around the country are reading. I also check to see whether I’m reading, or have read, any of these titles. Usually one or two are familiar, and this gives me a feeling of being current as a reader.



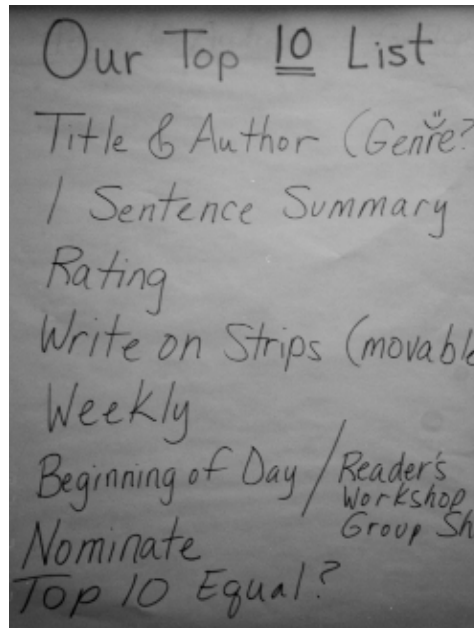
teaching tip

Book Share

Let students (usually one or two a day) request time in which to share a book they love with the whole class. The purpose is to get their friends excited about the book as well. Fifth-grade teacher Marnie Danielski, in Westminster, Colorado, reports that several students always want to read the shared books. They get a waiting list going so everyone has a chance to read the book.



Audiences for Top 10 list



Jotting down ideas for Top 10 list



Top Ten Book List

Students love developing their own “top-ten” lists. In Mike Marinello’s fifth-grade class, we talked about possible audiences and procedures for these lists (see the following photographs), and the excitement translated into authentic writing about ways to publicize the list (see below and see the photograph on page 72). One of the best things about the writing was the excellent quality. Because of the ownership the students felt and because their audiences were clear and important to them, students took the writing—including revising and editing for spelling, grammar, and word choice—very seriously. Best of all, all the excitement generated interest in reading and the students read more. Mike comments:

Our “top-ten” discussion was one of the most important literacy events of the year. Of course, at first, my students all wanted their own favorites in the top ten. As the discussion progressed, however, they saw the importance of many people liking the book for it to be included. Later, I noticed my students were more persuasive in getting their peers to read their favorite books. A favorite title may not have made this week’s top-ten list, but in time the books kids felt most passionate about would be recognized.

TRY IT APPLY IT

Make Books and Book Talk “Hot”

- ✎ Give book talks on new and noteworthy books in your collection, and encourage students to do the same. These “commercials” help sell books to potential readers.
- ✎ Create best-seller lists of authors and titles, and share these with other classrooms and audiences. (See the list shown on page 71 for possible audiences.)
- ⇒ Form a committee to nominate awards for “best books” or “favorite books.” Vote on names for book awards and the winners. Establish selection criteria modeled on book awards such as the Newbery Medal (for children’s fiction), the Caldecott Medal (for children’s book illustrations), the Orbis Pictus Award (for nonfiction), and the National Book Award (for adult fiction).
- ✎ Advertise books by designing posters, writing blurbs and reviews, and creating book jackets. (Note the following ad for a student’s favorite series).

Replica Advertisement

Have you ever wanted to read a book series that is unique and exciting? If you have, then you should read the Replica series. It is about a 12 year old girl, who finds out she is a clone. A clone named Amy who is practically perfect. For example, she has amazingly quick reflexes, super sensitive hearing and incredible eyesight! She is so bright that she often finishes her school exams in one minute! She uses her special talents to read people's minds, travel through time, and enter a computer's virtual reality. Amy's adventures are both interesting and captivating. By reading one book, you'll be hooked and want to finish the whole series.

Brianna
Brianna Rae Neuenkirchen

After Brianna talked about and wrote the ad, she brought in books for peers to borrow. Many students began reading this series (which was previously unknown to them).

Make Classroom and School Libraries Attractive, Comfortable, and Accessible for Reading

Where do you read? My guess is that you don't do it sitting at a desk all day. I read in bed, on my living room sofa, on the floor, in a favorite chair, in doctors' offices, in school, in the car while I'm waiting for something or someone. I have books, magazines, and other reading material next to my kitchen table, piled high on the coffee table in the living room, on shelves throughout the house, in the bathroom, next to my bed, in my pocketbook.

My home library has sections for fiction, poetry, memoir, professional books, and children's literature (these last two are subdivided into many subcategories to help me locate books easily). I am constantly rearranging my shelves for easy access.

TRY IT APPLY IT

- ✍ Create an attractive reading corner with room for at least several students.
- ✍ Invite the students to help you create small reading corners for one or two students.
- ⇒ Provide comfortable seating: bean-bag chairs, a special reading chair (maybe a rocker), a sofa.
- ✍ Evaluate the lighting in your room. Small lamps add a warm, cozy glow.
- ✍ Make the school office, principal's office, and meeting rooms reading places. Have baskets of books and various reading materials available.

Devon Isherwood, a principal in Mesa, Arizona, has always maintained a great collection of children's books in her office and allowed students to borrow them. Now her collection is also easily accessible: with her guidance, students have organized most of her books into bins, sorting by categories like books by the same author, poetry books, books about the environment, books about animals, fairy tales, ABC books, little books, easy books, chapter books. Now students can find books easily, and they make it a point to put them back in the right bin when they are finished with them.

A word about school libraries and media centers. While these spaces are ideally suited to be the heart of the school, too often dingy, outdated furniture, awkwardly arranged in rooms featuring dull colors, make them uninviting places. We need to see what we can do about repainting and reorganizing these rooms so they beckon readers. In Huntsville, Ohio, principal Diane Gillespie, along with her staff, spent part of a summer weeding out and giving away "ancient" books, repainting the room, and adding a reading loft (which Diane's husband built). While previously few students chose the library as a destination, now they can't wait to use it—it has become the most sought after space in school.



Students reading during their lunch hour in principal Devon Isherwood's office (Mesa, AZ)

Involve Your Students in Library Design and Organization

When students help create the library, they use it more. Too often, we teachers do all the work. Not only does that take lots of teacher time that could be better spent elsewhere, but also students are less likely to find material they like, which, in turn, affects how much they read. I have watched some teachers work hard to create lovely looking libraries. But they organize these spaces for themselves, and the books are often not easily accessible to students—in terms of the types of reading materials that have been chosen and the way they are displayed and located. However, once teachers give up some control and let their



Beginning to sort and organize books for the classroom library

students help make the decisions, pleasant surprises await. With demonstrations and guidance, even first graders can take full responsibility for categorizing, sorting, and organizing books and returning them to agreed-on places—and they love doing so. (Note a third-grade class’s worksheet below for determining what categories and authors to include in their class library.) Not only that, students begin to take pride in “their” library. You’ll be surprised and delighted at how neat and orderly students keep the library once they are involved in organizing it.

Given the physical limitations of the classroom and the expense of securing and housing sufficient quantities of good books, it can be a challenge to create a wonderful, accessible library space. However, it’s a challenge we must undertake. When I am in classrooms with rich libraries created and maintained by the teacher and students, grand enthusiasm for reading and talk about books permeate every aspect of the curriculum.

Circle the categories you think we should have:

Buddy Books	Mysteries
Magic Books	Realistic Fiction
Poetry	Animal Fiction
Natural Science	Interesting People
Applied Science	Tales & Legends
Animal Non-fiction	Chapter Books
History & Biography	Math Books
Picture Books	Favorite Authors
Magic School Bus	Duos
Funny Books	_____ Books
_____ Books	_____ Books

Who are our favorite authors?

Patricia Polacco	Barbara Cooney	Jane Yolen
Marc Brown	Roald Dahl	Eric Carle
Aliki	Dr. Seuss	Laura Ingalls Wilder
Lois Ehlert	Kevin Henkes	Chris Van Allsberg
Leo Lionni	Tomie dePaola	_____
Janet Stevens	Cynthia Rylant	_____
Helen Lester	Beverly Cleary	_____

Student worksheet for deciding what to include in their library (Jane Jones's grade 3 class)

**TRY IT
APPLY IT**

*Involve Your
Students
in Library
Design and
Organization*

- ✍ Invite students to submit design plans for a “new” library. Use graph paper, so students can draw to scale.
- ✍ Solicit parents for comfortable furniture they may no longer be using, such as a rocking chair and bean-bag chairs.
- ✍ Add a lamp or two to your library corner to make it cozy and inviting.
- ✍ If you don't have a carpeted area for reading on the floor, carpet squares are an inexpensive, portable alternative.
- ✍ Form a committee to evaluate present library design and make recommendations.
- ✍ Consider a special section for content-area books pertaining to current areas of study and thematic units. Include space for related objects such as nature collections (rocks, shells) or plants.
- ✍ Have students sort, label, and shelve books by genre, interest, difficulty, series, author, etc.
- ✍ Work out a manageable “sign out” system that students manage. (See the Teaching Tip on page 67.)



A section of a newly organized classroom library